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ABSTRACT

The exploration of deserted farms as a teaching technique is described in this paper. A farm actually used by a class is described. The method used for exploring the farm consisted of dividing the class into small groups before the visit, allowing time for each group to prepare for a specific assignment, and scheduling a meeting for all students to form general conclusions about the farm after the investigation. The special assignments included gathering information about the house site, the barn, garden and orchard, and roads and fences. The curriculum areas covered were art, language arts, science, arithmetic, and conservation. It was noted that the fundamental concepts developed in a deserted farm experience included an understanding of past misuse of farm land and other resources which are currently affecting modern day communities and that human resources rise or fall with the natural resources. (PS)

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OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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EXPLORING A DESERTED FARM - AN OUTDOOR EDUCATION TECHNIQUE

1970

Most deserted farms have a certain sadness about them, especially when various farm implements and personal possessions have been left, broken or forgotten. Despite the frequent atmosphere of tragedy and sadness, a deserted farm can provide many opportunities for learning the sociology, economics, and history of a preceding era. A visit to a deserted farm by a class of school children and their teacher will afford many firsthand experiences with a way of life described in a secondhand fashion in the textbooks.

Exploring deserted farms as a teaching technique was first introduced to this writer by Dr. William G. Vinal, emeritus professor of nature education, University of Massachusetts. It was many years later that his methods were to be implemented by the writer. A deserted farm was discovered by coincidence one day when exploring the woodlands located near the community where he was teaching.

The crossing of a sagging barb wire fence led to the discovery of the unpainted exterior of an ancient farmhouse with broken windows and rotting wooden gutters sagging from the eaves. On the front porch an old grindstone was slowly disintegrating from the forces of the environment. Over the front door was a well worn horseshoe indicating someone's belief in the good luck qualities of this metallic object. Inside there were creaky wooden floors, broken furniture and peeling wallpaper. Underneath the strips of wallpaper were sheets of newspapers dating back one half of a century. Overhead, the ceiling had broken away exposing the rough hewn timbers and the pegged joints. The roof had a look of disorganization with hand hewn oak shingles reaching skyward at their ends.

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Outside, a short distance from the house stood an old barn. Weathered and unpainted, it had withstood the test of time with a great deal more tenacity than the farmhouse. Near the barn were various types of horse-drawn equipment and other pieces of rusted farm machinery hidden beneath a jungle of pokeweeds and burdock nurtured by the fertility of a long-deserted barnyard. The battered windswept barn echoed with the melancholy music of the wind. Its corrugated tin roof flapped in the breeze while the loose sideboards groaned in accompaniment.

Inside the main beams and sills bore the marks of the adze and broadaxe. Bark still clung to the cross beams. The pulley for lifting hay bales to the loft was still intact near where a family of swallows once nested among the rafters. Suspended on the walls were several pairs of leather horse collars and assorted leather harness straps.

The pages of this outdoor textbook suddenly became clear and the implications for meaningful learning experiences for children was readily observed.

Exploration of the abandoned fields revealed further evidence of the tragedy and sadness of the farm. The fields were classic examples of eroded land and of nature's attempts to heal over the scars of Man's mistakes.

Several old house and barn foundations were scattered about the fields near old wagon roadways. These small farms had been deserted for many years. There were many clues about what the original farm was like among the things that still remained.

Several weeks later a class of school children and their teacher visited the deserted farm site. They spent the day exploring and discovering firsthand what their textbooks had described with words.

The class had been divided into small groups before the actual visit to the farm. Each small group had prepared for their specific

assignment. They were told to look closely for details that would help them reach conclusions about the farm. When each group had completed their investigation, they all met in an effort to form general conclusions about the farm.

A procedure for future classes to follow evolved out of the experience. This procedure consisted mainly of questions arising out of the small group investigations. The questions by groups were as follows:

House Site - Group 1

1. What materials were used in the construction of the foundation?
2. Which side was the front of the house?
3. How many levels did the house have?
4. Where were the perishable foods stored?
5. Where was the kitchen? The front room? The bedrooms?
6. Where did the water supply for the house come from?
7. What evidence is there of the kind of exterior decoration of the house?
8. What were some of the chores and activities of the farm family?

Barn - Group 2

1. How large was the barn?
2. What was the barn used for?
3. What evidence can you find that indicates that it was an old barn?
4. What kind of lumber was used in the construction of the barn?
5. What tools or implements did you find in the barn?
6. What hand tools were used in the construction of the barn?
   Where is the evidence?
7. Where did the water supply for the barn originate?

Garden and Orchard - Group 3

1. What things are still growing in the remains of the garden?
2. How large was the garden?
3. Where were the fruits and vegetables stored?

4. How large was the orchard?

5. What kinds of trees were in the orchard?

6. How old are the trees in the orchard?

7. Where is the flower garden?

8. Are domestic flowers still growing in the garden?

9. What other signs of domestic vegetation can you find on the farm site?

Roads and Fences - Group 4

1. Is there evidence of the boundary fences?

2. How were the fences made? What tools and equipment were employed?

3. Why were the fences built?

4. How many roads are there leading to the farm?

5. Are there any shade trees? What Kinds? Who planted them?

6. Where was the front lawn?

7. Is there a family burial plot? Was it fenced in?

8. Are there any roads leading to fields or orchards?

General Questions - Entire Class

1. What do you think happened to the descendants of the farm family?

2. Why was the farm deserted?

3. Was the family considered wealthy or poor in comparison to their neighbors?

4. Is there any indication of poor land use?

5. What was the main product of the farm?

These are but a few of the possible questions which can be raised. The geographical location of the deserted farm will determine the kinds of potential questions. Follow-up can occur back in the classroom. Old courthouse records can be utilized as resource material if they are available. Many curriculum areas can be interrelated in the study of a deserted farm. Art and language arts can be utilized to great advantage in the child's perceptive awareness of the deserted farm environment. Science is everywhere

at the deserted farm site. Arithmetic was a part of every farm family's productive life. The deserted farm and the natural resources surrounding it may well be integrated into units commonly taught. Conservation may be presented as a problem in sociology and economics in the study of a deserted farm. Many fundamental concepts essential to Man's well being can be developed in a deserted farm experience. Understanding that results of past misuse of farm land and other resources are currently affecting modern day communities is one possible concept evolving out of a deserted farm study. The concept that human resources rise or fall with the natural resources or that the quest for a higher standard of living might be an indication of what has happened to the natural resources are more efficiently developed through direct experience. Exploring deserted farms is just one of the many direct experience situations that will enrich the efficiency of learning for the school child.